

An Analysis of the Female Characters in E.M.Forster's Novels

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Abstract: This paper analyses the female characters in E.M.Forster's novels from the perspective of feminism, through the deep exploration of E.M.Forster's works, it is evident to draw a conclusion that there are four kinds of female characters: first of all, stubborn and arrogant old ladies; the second type is insensitive but self-awakening middle-aged ladies; the third type is knowledgeable and smart young ladies; the last one is the warm-hearted and benevolent lady. These four kinds of different female characters can reveal that E. M. Forster has a contradictory attitude towards women. For one thing, he respected and sympathized with women, for another he discriminated against women.

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1 Introduction

Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970) is one of the most eminent novelist and critics in the history of English literature in the 20th century. His works have been highly praised by outstanding scholars and critics in the literary field. The prominent British writer D.H.Lawrence once commented Forster as "the best of my contemporaries in England" in his letter to the Italian critic Carlo Linati^[1]. The well-known American literary critic Lionel Trilling praised Forster as "E. M. Forster is for me the only living novelist who can be read again and again and who, after each reading, give me what few writers can give us after our first days of novels-reading, the sensation of having learned something^[2]."

As a long-lived writer, Forster only created six

complete novels in his whole life: *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910), *A Passage to India* (1924) and the unpublished *Maurice*(completed in 1914 but published in 1971). Although Forster was not a prolific writer, nobody could deny his vital literary achievements and position in British literature field. The distinctive feature of Forster's works owes to his profound insight and deep observation on the social problems in his era. Among those problems, most of them are about the female issues. Forster created different female characters to reflect these problems in his novels. Compared with his contemporaries, the female characters in Forster's works are not similar to the delicate character description in Virginia Woolf's works and emotional character description in D.H. Lawrence's novels, but they all represented E.M. Forster's unique writing style.

E. M. Forster succeeded in portraying female characters in his works. By creating these female characters, he intended to disclose the oppressive living condition of women, and expose the subordinate position of women in the patriarchal society. He criticized the Victorian doctrines and moral standards imposed upon women, that is just another way for the male to dominate the female.

2 Contributors to Forster's Portrayal of Female Characters

There are mainly three factors that contribute to Forster's portrayal of female characters.

2.1 Family Background

E.M. Forster was born in a middle-class family in London. His father was a promising architect, but died when Forster was only two years old. Without his

father, Forster was brought up by his grandmother, his aunt and his mother. Therefore, Forster's childhood and adolescence was surrounded and dominated by women. These feminine family members definitely influenced his creation a lot, especially his mother, Lily, was an overprotective mother who wanted to dominate her son and did not remarry. Owing to this special family background, we can easily find the fact that E.M Forster's observation of female psychology is more vivid, unique and sensitive, compared with other contemporary male writers, thus the female characters in his novels are more distinctive and thought-provoking.

2.2 Historical Background

Forster was born in 1879, which is the last decade of Queen Victorian Age. In that era, the male were considered as the head or the master of the family because the male played a vital role in the economic progress. On the contrary, the female were viewed as the angels of the family and their duties were taking care of the children and obeying the British conventions. Women did not have their own rights or political voices and were imprisoned at home, thus they must depend on the male.

Queen Victoria passed away in 1901 and her son Edward VII succeeded the crown. Unlike his conservative mother Queen Victoria, Edward VII was open-minded and radical. He was fond of traveling, and loved art and appreciated the free lifestyle. The female began to claim loudly for equal rights. The women's suffrage movement reached a climax during the Edwardian Era. These two factors led to a series of tremendous changes in female position in society. Forster witnessed the changes in these two eras. These changes were reflected through his portrayal of female characters.

2.3 Education Experience

E.M Forster had a happy childhood and received a good education under the careful cultivation and protection of his mother. He attended King's College, Cambridge in 1897, where he joined in the Bloomsbury Group. The Bloomsbury Group advocated that each individual possesses a full range of human potential; that each person must strive, not to be manly or ladylike, but to be human^[3]. The establishment of this group was to oppose to the traditional, hypocritical and unequal society, the members of the group publicly rebelled

against the sexual conventions and they endeavored to fight for sexual equality. Forster was in line with this group and despised the unequal treatment with women. These ideas were embodied in Forster's creation of female characters. Meanwhile, under the enlightenment of Cambridge, Forster paid attention to the harmonious personal relationships between each other and cared about the life of the individual. What's more, he began to doubt about the conservative codes of morality and outdated doctrines.

3 Four Types of Female Characters

E. M. Forster's major portrayal of female characters can be divided into four types: to start with, the old ladies who are stubborn and arrogant and stick to the old conventions; the second type is the middle aged ladies who are insensitive but self-awakening; the third type is the young ladies who have received advanced education and become knowledgeable and enlightened; the last one is the ladies who are warm-hearted and sympathize with the weak.

3.1 Stubborn and Arrogant Old Ladies

This group of people is mainly the older female generation, who are stubborn and arrogant. On the surface, the author criticizes these hypercritical old ladies, in fact the writer satirizes the traditional social customs. The representative figures are mainly the following persons: Mrs. Herriton in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, Mrs. Honeychurch in *A Room with a View* and the wives of officials in *A Passage to India*. They are more likely to support the conservative ideas and the traditional conventions.

Mrs. Herriton in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* represented the traditional power of the English town Thornton. She firmly stuck to the old conventions and rejected the new thoughts. Mrs. Herriton cherished the fame of her family in her whole life and did not believe emotional and spiritual communication. Although she claimed that she would give a bright future for her granddaughter and the son of Gino and Lilia, in fact, she did not care about her granddaughter and grandson and she just catered to her personal vanity. If the son of her daughter-in-law Lilia grew up in this kind of terrible condition, it would humiliate her family. She tried her best to get back custody right of Lilia's son, even stole the child.

Mrs. Honey church in *A Room with a View* makes effort to let her daughter Lucy become a conventional

woman. Lucy was good at playing the piano, especially the works of Beethoven. Mrs. Honey church worries about music, for she found that whenever her daughter Lucy finished playing the piano she would be in a peevish and unpractical state^[4]. When Lucy grew up, the snobbish Mrs. Honey church only wanted to choose a son-in-law with a rich fortune from the upper class and regarded Cecil as Lucy's perfect fiance regardless of her daughter's unsatisfactory. Although Mrs. Honey church herself could not stand Cecil's hypocrisy and arrogance, she disagreed with Lucy who fell in love with George, because George is absolutely incompatible with her social criteria.

In *A Passage to India* the wives of British officials were very arrogant and maintained that they came to India to enlighten the brutal Indians and helped the natives from chaos to the orderly state. They despised the Indians and thought the Indians were stupid and brutal. They were inferior to them. One typical example was that Mrs. Leslie and Tetons publicly occupied Dr. Aziz's carriage and did not pay or thank Dr. Aziz, they regarded their behaviors as a rational deed and took it for granted that the Indians should respect the British people.

To some extent, these female characters embodied Forster's concern on the traditional morality and social problems. By depicting these female characters, Forster criticized the indifference and snobbery of middle-class Englishmen with an ironic voice, in his opinion, they have lost their true nature. Forster focused on the mutual understanding between different people from different cultures and social statuses.

3.2 Insensitive but Self-awakening Middle-aged Ladies

Forster's second category of women describes women who are insensitive but they can gradually awaken by themselves. The description of this kind of women symbolizes hope, so that the "the underdeveloped hearts" can be recovered slowly^[5].

This kind of women are shown in many of Forster's works, such as Caroline in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. Caroline is a representative victim of the British society at that time. The life for her was very dull and boring and she had to keep the conventions in mind every day and did everything according to the traditional concept. In order to complete the holly task given by mother her to take back the son of Gino and her sister-in-law Lilia, she paid a visit to Italy. However, when she trod on the

new territory, she was inspired by the fresh nature and the romantic love in Italy at once. In the end, Caroline fell in love with Gino when she saw Gino taking a bath for his son. As a result, she broke through the hypocritical outdated middle-class ethics and converted to a more liberal and frank lady at last. She determined to start a new life. In Forster's opinion, true love means mutual salvation and perfection.

Lilia in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* is another typical victim of the patriarchal doctrines upon women. Lilia was born with an innocent, vigorous and outgoing personality, but unfortunately, she got married with Mr. Herriton, a traditional Victorian gentleman. After the marriage, she had been in the subordinate position in the family for 10 years. Regardless of her husband's death, she was still dominated by the family and could not get rid of the miserable life, for she is "continually subject to the refining influences of her late husband's family"^[6]. All her chances of remarriage were refused, for an improper marriage might make the Herriton family lose face. She was trapped in the family to look after her child and deprived of her freedom to do anything she preferred, which made her feel suffocated, so she decided to visit Italy. When she landed on the new country, the free and vibrant atmosphere made her awakened. The miserable sufferings in the Herriton family directly led to her brave marriage with Gino, a poor Italian dentist's son. She wanted to take revenge on the Herriton family by her own method.

Charlotte in *A Room with a View* is also another victim of the British traditional morality. Charlotte went to Italy with Lucy as a guardian to protect her and at the same time as a defender of the tradition concept of the British middle class. She guided Lucy's routine and reminded her to abide strictly by the rules of social morality. When Lucy fell in love with George, Charlotte tried her best to let them break up. Although Charlotte had the original intention of protecting Lucy and was delighted that she could appear in time to stop George from "bullying" Lucy, as a result, her concern made Lucy feel suffocated and Lucy was tired of her stale and disgusting ideas. However, it was such a person who firmly upheld the decadent morality of the middle class, and finally changed. She created a chance for Lucy to have a talk with Mr. Emerson and encouraged Lucy to pursue her true love with George.

Considering the social background, Forster showed his satire on the improper social conventions and successfully depicted women's oppressed status at that

time. He claimed that women should have equal social status as men and sympathized with them.

3.3 Knowledgeable and Enlightened Young Ladies

Another category of women in Forster's works is the knowledgeable, intelligent and enlightened young ones. Forster respected these women because they received higher education and became knowledgeable and intelligent. They attempted to search for their own value in society and explore the real meaning of life. Margaret in *Howards End*, Lucy in *A Room with a View* and Adela in *A Passage to India* all belong to this group.

Margaret Schlegel in *Howards End*, who was a young lady with compassion and rationality and mostly appreciated with high praise by the readers. Although she was knowledgeable and emotional, her husband, Mr. Wilcox, was shallow and narrow-minded person who lacks compassion. The reason why Margaret chose to marry Mr. Wilcox was on the basis of keen observation and deep thinking. Marguerite understood that she was in a superior position was based on the material created by industrialists, so she was not prejudiced against businessman like ordinary intellectuals, but with gratitude^[7]. For one thing, she firmly held the idea to transform Mr. Wilcox by marrying him; for another, she hoped to learn the merits of businessmen from Mr. Wilcox to make herself a more perfect woman. At the end of the novel, Margaret eventually possessed the mansion of Howards End symbolized that Margaret defeated her husband Mr. Wilcox's pride and hypocrisy and she and overthrew the rigid patriarchal ideology that men were master, controller and dominator while women are being controlled in a subordinate position. She demonstrated that the female could have the same right as the male.

Lucy in *A Room with a View* was brought up under the rigid British Victorian moralities and doctrines. When she grew up, she was required to develop ladylike behaviors and prepared to fulfill her task to become an obedient wife in a male-oriented society. However, Lucy was not a conservative and obedient girl, instead she got tired of this boring life and the strict British doctrines and the moral codes of values. She was eager to experience some unexpected challenges. She went to Italy with Charlotte. When she encountered the Italian culture, Lucy was deeply attracted by the vigorous and free atmosphere and was fascinated by the energetic, radical and handsome young man

George from the lower class and tried to break up with the Victorian moralities and principles, but she failed because of the invisible pressure from her relatives and friends. Cecil was an ideal husband in the eyes of elder generations, and his behaviors and attitude made Lucy feel uncomfortable. In the end, by the encouragement from Mr. Emerson, Lucy was brave to pursue her true love and became a woman with independent thoughts. She had experienced three periods of spiritual struggles: from the confused period to the ambivalent period and finally to the awakened period. The spiritual process was painful but was also rewarding, it was a growth of self-awareness.

Adela in *A Passage to India* was also this kind of girl who was well-educated and could correct their mistakes by herself. In the eyes of the readers, she was even a little naive, but the Marabar Cave incident has made her experience unprecedented self-salvation. After the incident, Adela became very courageous, frank and pursued self-independence. When she realized her mistake, she was able to face it honestly and went deep into the analysis of the reasons that caused the failure between her fiancé and her and broke the engagement. Adela came to India with a wish to explore the "real India", the mysterious echo in Marabar cave not only made her puzzled but also awakened her self-conscious as a woman at the same time. She realized that she did not love her fiancé, Ronny.

When she realized that she did not play an important role in India, at Fielding's Tea party, she announced that she did not want to stay in India any more and decided to return home to start her own career in order to achieve economic independence. In the face of all kinds of difficulties and hardships on her way back to her motherland, she was not afraid and defended her dignity and rights. After the journey to India, Adela gradually grew up and no longer attached to others, instead she became a considerable and independent person like Mrs Moore. She was on the way to create a life of self-esteem and self-improvement.

Through the awareness of these characters' real feeling, their minds became mature and understood the real meaning of life. Thus these female characters' awakening model also represented Forster's hope for a bright future and a harmoniousness society.

3.4 Warm-hearted and Benevolent Lady

Among the women created in Forster's works, Mrs. Moore in *A Passage to India* is a very special woman. She believed in Christianity and was an ideal and

perfect woman in Forster's mind. Mrs. Moore was a Christian and the representative of Christianity. She was a person with social responsibility. There was a sharp contrast between her son and herself, she was wise, sensitive, tolerant and kind-hearted, while her son was a violent and ruthless character. As soon as she came to India, she severely criticized and pointed out her son's bad behavior towards the Indians. She told her son to keep in mind the purpose that the British came to India in search of happiness not for priority. God brought us to this world is to make all ethnic groups more peaceful and harmonious. She disliked the British people to look down upon the Italian people and despised the British officials to showed their contempt and superiority to the local Italian people.

Mrs. Moore had a keen observation on people and things, and she did everything according to her conscience. We could not find any prejudice against the Indians when she communicated with the Indians. On the contrary, she could establish a friendly friendship with the local people in India. That is the reason why she agreed with her daughter-in-law Adela's idea to have a visit to the Marabar Cave. She followed the principle set by the Indians to take off one's shoes when you entered a temple and gained the respect from Dr. Aziz in India and established a profound friendship with him for she thought the harmonious human relationship was an effective method to solve some social problems. At the same time, with an honest and trustworthy concept of life, she absolutely denied the absurd accusation of Dr. Aziz, even if her son is determined to send her back to Britain. She insisted that Aziz was innocent and told Adela that she made a wrong judgement on Dr. Aziz and should be aware of her prejudice against the Indians. When she was on her way back to Britain, all the local people shouted her names to thank for her kindness, generosity and benevolence. She was regarded as a benefactress of Indian people that her figure became a sort of apotheosis. Mrs Moore emphasized that the genuine relationships between human beings should be based on the mutual communications and understandings and she endeavored to explore the effective path of cooperation and coexistence.

Helen Schlegel in *Howards End* was a 21-year-old young and compassionate girl. Like her elder sister Margaret, she was independent, humanistic and radical, and devoted herself to indulge in philanthropy and she had unique views on arts and literature. In order to

break through the shackles of the British conventions, she traveled abroad alone. She appreciated the impoverished radical young man, Leonard Bast, who had the same common interest in music, while she hated the rich timid young man, Paul, and especially disliked her brother-in-law, Mr. Wilcox, who was a hypocritical, utilitarian capitalist. Because of Mr. Wilcox's wrong suggestion let Leonard out of work, she courageously stood up to help her friend Leonard confront with Mr. Wilcox for righteousness and justice. She did not care about money and social status. She sympathized with the poor. In the end she fell in love with Leonard. She bravely revolted against the restriction of social conventions and became a humanistic goddess.

The friendship between Mrs. Moore and Dr. Aziz and the connection between Helen and Leonard symbolizes the union of different classes, no matter you came from an upper-class, a middle-class or a lower class. Everybody was equal in Foster's eyes. He firmly believed that the subordinate female could also deconstruct the unfair patriarchal ideology.

4 The Significance of the Existence of the Female Characters

Through the detail analysis of these female characters in his works, it is clearly seen that Forster is a person with high social responsibility. He advocated an honest, free and passionate lifestyle and maintained that we should not be restrained by social conventions or moralities. Forster despised those snobbish English gentlemen and criticized their conceited and presumptuous lifestyle in his works. In his novels, Forster exposed the deficiency of the British people and planned to find possible ways to change the underdeveloped hearts into developed ones. Forster successfully created and depicted all kinds of female characters in his novels. He hopes that the British people in that period could find their own prejudices, snobbery, and hypocrisy after reading his novels and finally correct their mistake and get self-improvement. Forster regarded these female character as catalysts that can help the British people find out their wrong behaviors, get rid of their traditional concept and transform them into the right track.

Forster arranged a journey for the female characters in most of his novels to Italy, which was a place where Greek culture originated and later where the Renaissance came into being, therefore, Italy had been regarded as an ideal destination for travel and transformation. Compared with the Italians'

appreciation and worship of human intrinsic desire, the British people suppressed the wonderful love between man and woman and viewed this natural affection as a kind of “sin”. Forster expected the female characters could learn from Italian culture and get rid of the shackles of the traditional British doctrines. The free and romantic environment in Italy made the heroines discontented with their miserable life in Britain so that they formed a new strength to rebel against it. All the heroines changed a lot after they had been to Italy, they could liberate themselves for freedom, embrace love and passions, and escape from their stifling everyday life and seek for their personal identities.

5 Conclusion

In brief, we can easily draw a conclusion that E. M. Forster has a contradictory attitude towards women. For one thing, Forster himself expressed great concern about female liberation. He held the feminist thoughts from a male writer’s point of view. In his novels, he managed to show his respect and sympathy towards women. He held the idea that the rigid codes of morality were the invisible obstacles to restrain female independence and liberation. In addition, Forster maintained that the male and the female should have the same right and status in society and they are equal in the family. He coped with

a set of feminist issues in favor of female characters in his novels in which we could see his progressiveness and improvement. For another, he has limitations in his attitude towards women. Forster could not totally abandon the influence of the patriarchal conventions. He proclaimed that men played an important part in female emancipation. Without wise men’s guidance and enlightenment, women can’t gain freedom and liberation by their own efforts.

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